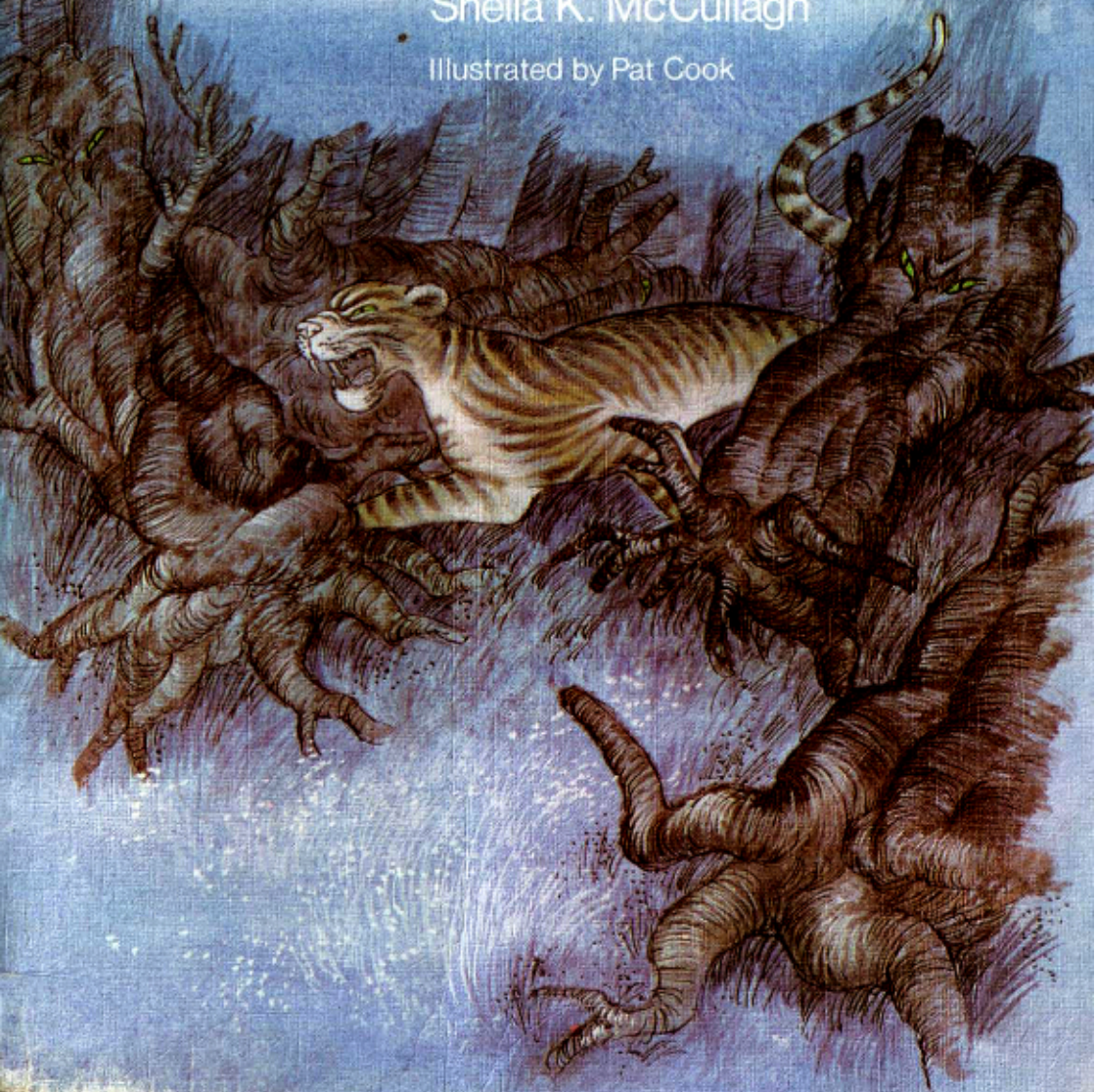


Tim and the Hidden People

# The Stump People

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook



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ARNOLD-WHEATON



Aunt May never minded if Tim wanted to go out for the day. She made some sandwiches for him, and gave him an apple.

"I'll leave your tea on the table, and the key under the stone, Tim," she said. "I'm going down to the shop tonight, and there's a party afterwards. One of the girls is getting married next week. So I'll be late."

"All right," said Tim. He pushed the sandwiches and the apple into his pocket, and ran off to Mr. Penny's shop. He was in plenty of time.





Mr. Penny was very busy. There were so many people in his shop, that Tim could hardly get inside.

Mr. Penny was all hot and bothered.

"Shan't be long, Tim," he said, as Tim slipped past a big, fat woman, who was holding her basket open. "But I must just finish. How many pounds of apples did you say, Mrs. Brown?"

Tim wanted to help, but Mr. Penny wouldn't let him.

"No, no," he said. "I'll be quicker on my own."

So Tim sat down on an empty box and waited.



It was long after three o'clock before the last person left the shop.

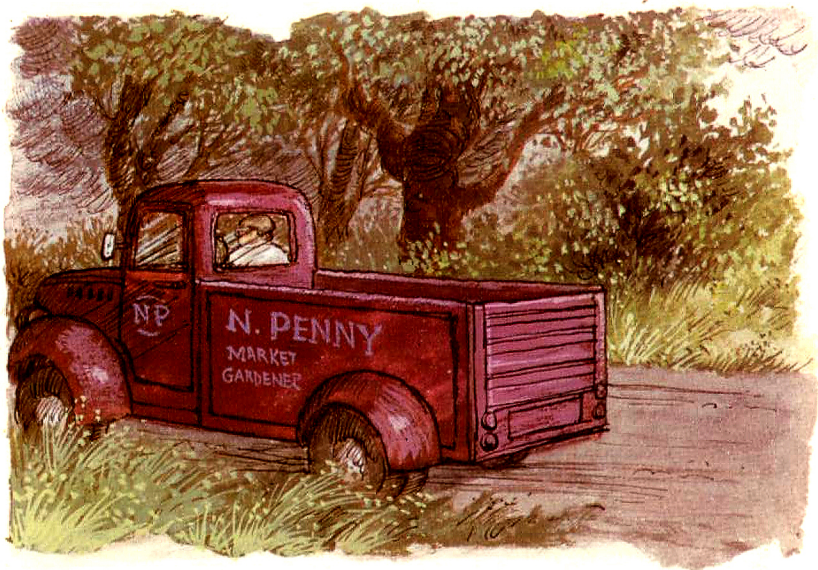
Mr. Penny wiped his face. He banged the shop door to, and bolted it.

"Well!" he said, turning back to Tim. "Well! I never had such a rush before. I can't think what's come over people. Come on, Tim. We're a bit late. Let's get out before anyone else comes."

The lorry was at the back door. Mr. Penny climbed into the cab, and Tim ran round and got in on the other side.

They were off at last.





The traffic seemed very heavy, but at last they were out of the town, and driving along the open road.

"It's not much of a day for you," said Mr. Penny. "Just look at those clouds!"

Dark black clouds, heavy with rain, were blowing up ahead of them.

"I'm going to see someone," said Tim.

"Sorry I was late," said Mr. Penny.

Tim could see the trees along the canal bank, away across the field on his left. He was just thinking that he still had plenty of time, when the engine began to bang, and the lorry stopped.



Mr. Penny got out, and went round to have a look at the engine.

He came back to the cab, and tried to start up again, but nothing happened.

He took another look at the engine.

Tim climbed out and went to look too.

"I don't know what's wrong with it," said Mr. Penny. "I'll have to get the garage. You'd better go on, Tim. You might get a lift, and this is going to take some time."





“All right,” said Tim. “Thanks, anyway, Mr. Penny!”

“Sorry about it, Tim,” said Mr. Penny. “But it can’t be helped.”

Tim set off down the road.

He had only just got round the bend, when the storm broke. A flash of lightning seemed to cut the sky in half. The thunder crashed overhead, and the rain came down in sheets.



Cars and lorries went by on the road, but none stopped. Perhaps the drivers didn't see Tim, in all the rain. The cars sent great sprays of water over him as they went by, and twice he had to jump right off the road into the ditch, or he would have been run down.





Tim came to a gate into a field on his left.

"I'd be better off the road, in all this rain," he said to himself. "No one's going to stop for me now."

He was dripping wet, and very muddy from the ditch.

He climbed the gate, and ran across the dripping grass until he came to the canal.



As suddenly as it had come, the rain stopped. The clouds were still low in the sky, and the path along the canal was running with water. Tim made his way slowly along. He was very wet, but it wasn't cold. His feet were so wet that he didn't bother to keep out of the big puddles that lay across the path.

He hadn't gone far, when he saw Hollow Hill, away across the fields on his left. It looked dark and lonely, and he was glad that it was on the other side of the canal.

"I can't be far from Melinda's house now," he said to himself. He broke into a run.





There was a flash of lightning across the sky, and the crash of thunder which followed seemed to shake the ground.

The rain poured down again.

Tim blundered along the canal bank. He saw some trees, a little way off to the right, and made his way across to them, looking for shelter.





To his surprise, as he came to the trees he saw a cottage beyond them. It was nearly hidden by trees and bushes, but there were lights inside, and the door was open.





A short, fat little man came to the doorway, and looked out into the rain. He had a dark red, cut-away coat, and a pair of black shoes with bright brass buckles. There was a pair of gold-rimmed glasses on the end of his nose.

The little man was looking out, over the tops of his glasses, into the teeming rain.

"Come in! Come in!" he cried, as soon as he saw Tim. "This is no day for a dog to be out! Come in, out of the storm."

The lightning flashed again over the trees.

The thunder rolled over the cottagé, as Tim stumbled across the door-step, and into the lighted room.

Tim had never seen anything like it before.

There was a bright fire in the great chimney at one end, and a wooden seat beside it. A wolf-skin hung on the wall, the head pointing upwards.

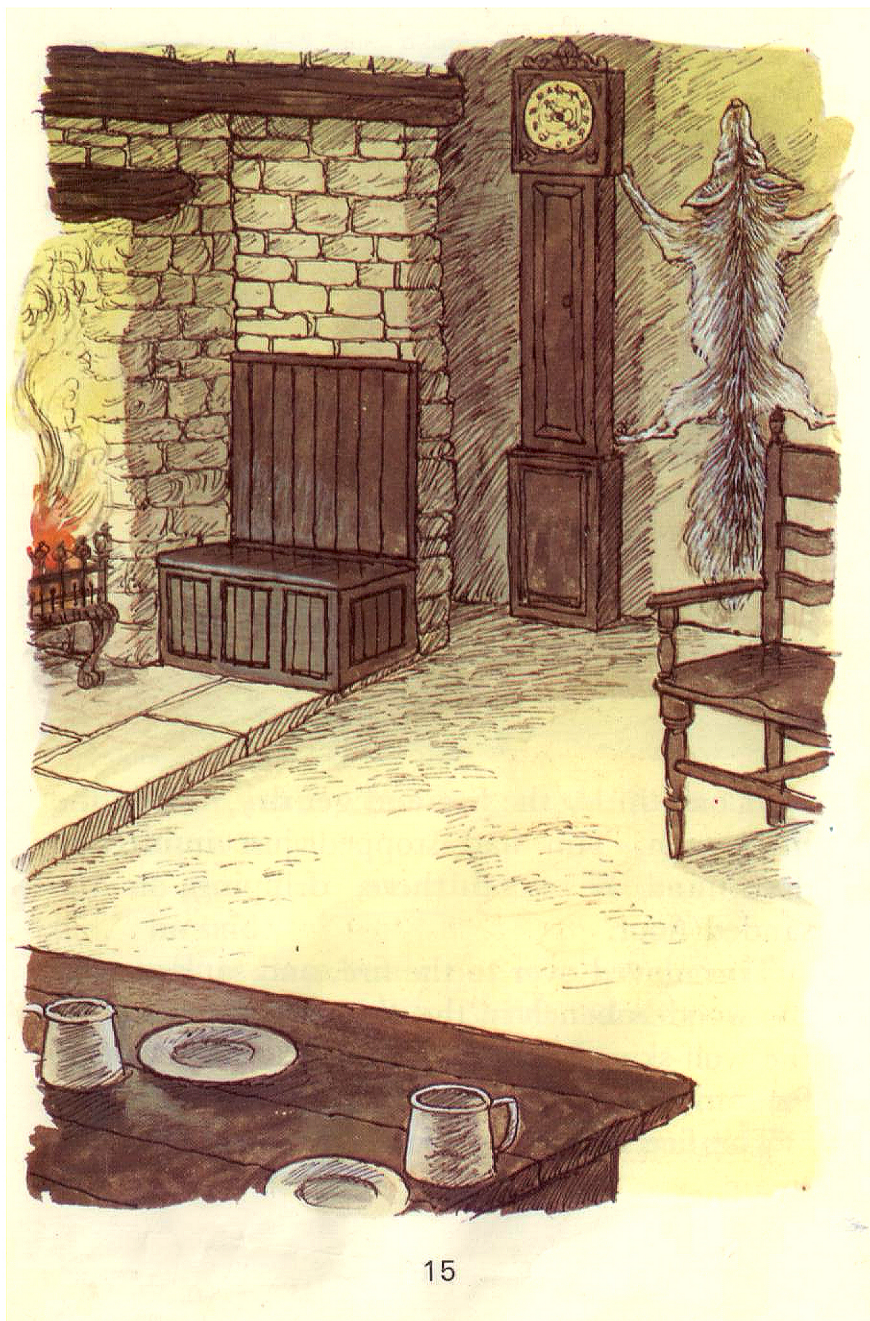
There was a long wooden table at one side, set with some grey mugs and plates. There were three or four wooden chairs.

At the other end of the room, there was a big bed. There were four posts around it, and curtains.

A grandfather clock stood by the fire.

The room was lit by lamps, which hung from the black beams in the ceiling.





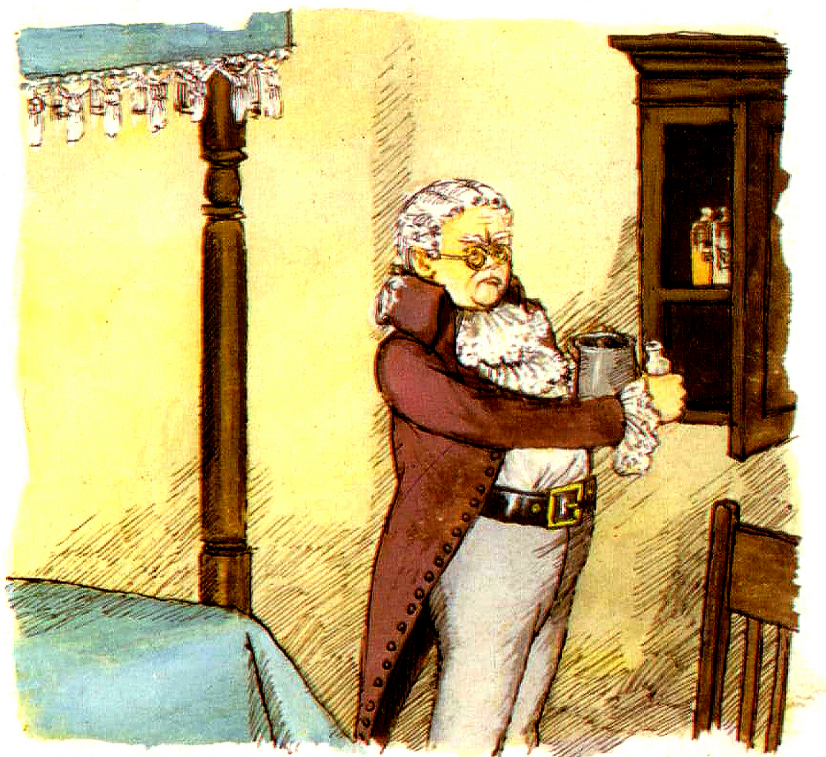


“Come in by the fire and get dry,” cried the little man. Tim had stopped just inside the door, and he stood there, dripping on the sanded floor.

Tim moved over to the fire, and sat down on the wooden bench in the chimney. He stared at the wolf-skin. It hung there like a coat, waiting for someone—or something—to put it on.

The fire blazed up, and Tim’s legs began to steam.





The little man went over to the table, and picked up a mug.

"You must take something to keep out the cold," he said.

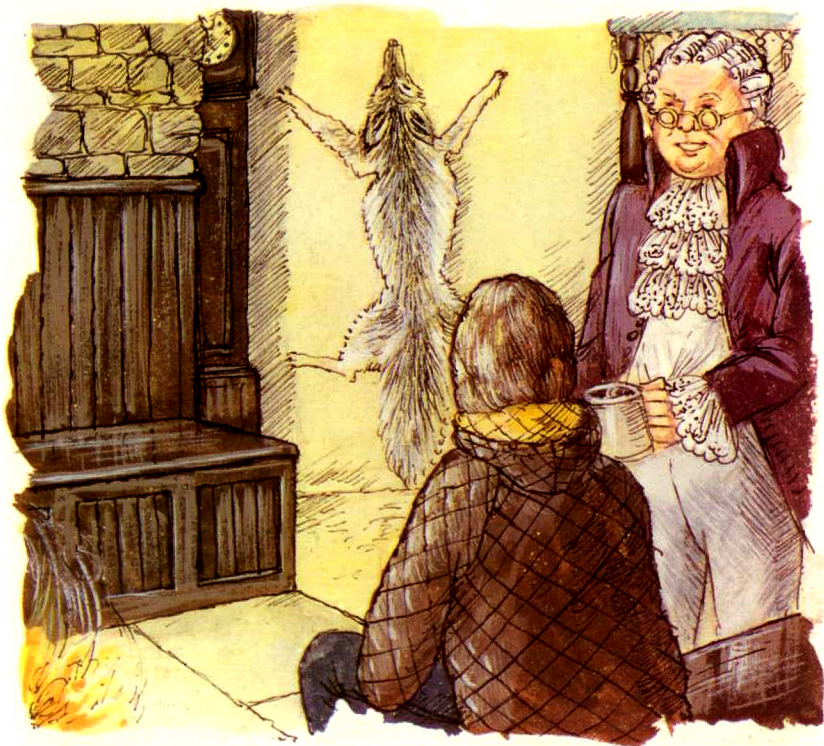
He took a glass bottle out of a wooden cupboard hanging in the corner, and poured something into the mug.

The little man spoke cheerfully, and yet there was something in his voice that Tim didn't like.



Tim looked up quickly. The little man held the mug in his hand, but his face had changed. His eyes looked very green and bright, just as Tobias' eyes sometimes looked. He was looking at Tim as if he hated him.





Then he saw that Tim was watching him, and his face changed again. He was smiling cheerfully, as he came across to the fire and handed Tim the mug.

“Drink it,” he said. “Then you won’t feel the cold any more.”

Tim took the mug and set it down beside him on the bench.

The little man stopped smiling. “Drink it!” he cried. He sounded angry.



“No,” said Tim, shaking his head.

The little man took a step towards him. For a moment, Tim thought he was going to strike him, and he got up.

Suddenly, the little man seemed to change his mind. He turned on his heel, walked across the room, and out of the open door.





Tim went across to the door, and looked out.

The little man had gone. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still black with clouds.

Tim was just going to leave the cottage himself, when he saw the tree stumps.

There were three large stumps, with broken branches waving in the wind, on the edge of the trees.



Tim stepped back into the room and slammed the door. There was a heavy wooden bar at one side, and he lifted it into place.

He looked quickly around the room, but there was no other doorway, and no stairs. The one room he stood in was the whole cottage.





He ran to the window and looked out.

There were five tree stumps outside now, and they were closer than they had been before.

As Tim watched, he saw two slanting green eyes open in the trunk of the biggest stump. The eyes shone green and bright, and they were watching Tim.



The grandfather clock behind him struck eight.

Tim jumped round. It was much later than he thought. He couldn't think where the time had gone. He looked out of the window again.

The tree stumps were nearer. It was growing dark outside, but he could still see them. There were more of them, too. Four or five of them had green eyes now, and they were all watching him.

They would soon be at the door of the cottage.





There was a sudden roar from the trees. Something jumped out from the bushes and in among the tree stumps, knocking them to one side.

They fell over, rolling away towards the trees, clawing themselves along with their roots and branches. There was the sound of breaking wood.

The light from the window streamed out into the dark, and for a moment Tim saw what was out there.

It was a tiger. Its eyes shone for a moment in the light.

Then, suddenly, everything was still.

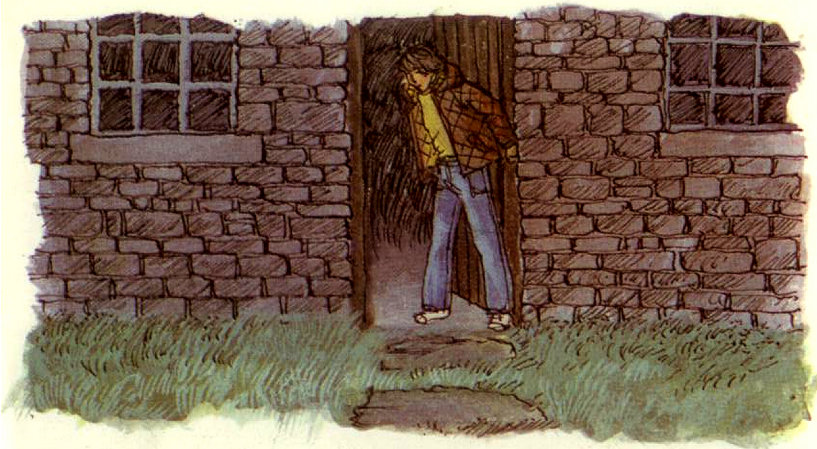


The lamps in the cottage behind him flickered out. The fire began to die down.

Tim still stood at the window, staring out into the night. The clouds blew away, and the moon shone down.

The tree stumps had all gone. So had the tiger—if there had ever been a tiger. Now that he had gone, Tim wasn't sure if the tiger had ever been there.





The grandfather clock struck nine.

Tim carefully lifted the bar from the door, opened it, and looked out.

There was no one outside.

He slipped out of the cottage and across the grass to the canal. He ran back a little way towards the town, and then he remembered Hollow Hill. He didn't want to pass Hollow Hill in the dark, even with the canal in between.

Tim turned, and made his way across a field to the road. He didn't see anyone. He climbed thankfully over a gate, and began to walk back along the road towards the town.

He remembered the sandwiches and the apple in his pocket. He pulled them out and ate them as he walked along.



He had just finished the apple, when something dropped on to the road in front of him with a clatter. He jumped back. Then he saw that it was the broomstick, with Tobias standing beside it.

“Tobias!” cried Tim, running forward. “Oh Tobias, I’m *so* glad to see you!”

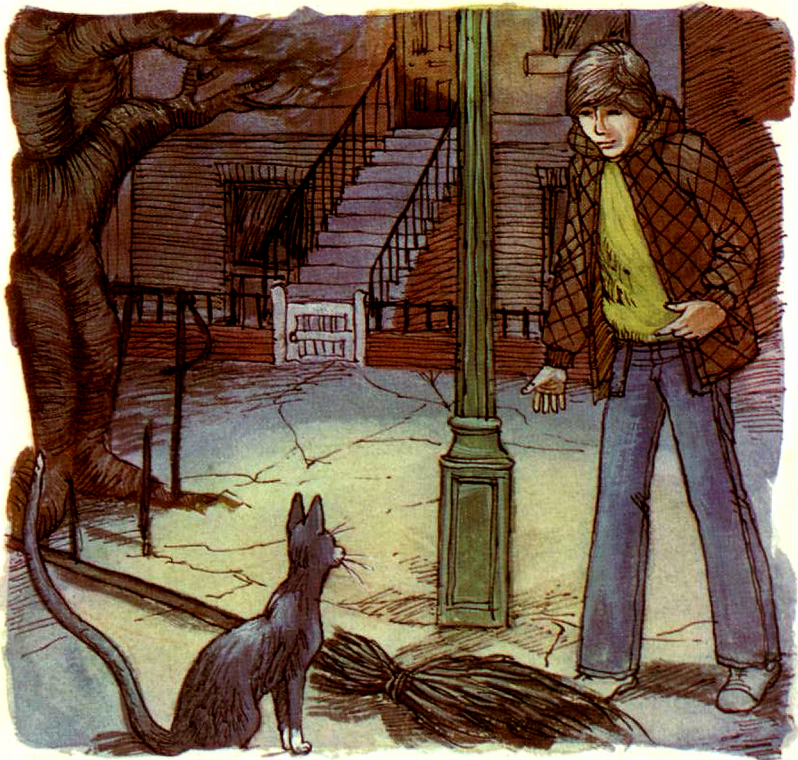
Tobias didn’t say anything. He jumped on to one end of the broomstick, and the broomstick lifted, until it was about a foot off the ground.





Tim climbed on to it. Tobias waved his tail wildly, and the broomstick shot up into the sky with a jerk which almost shook Tim off.

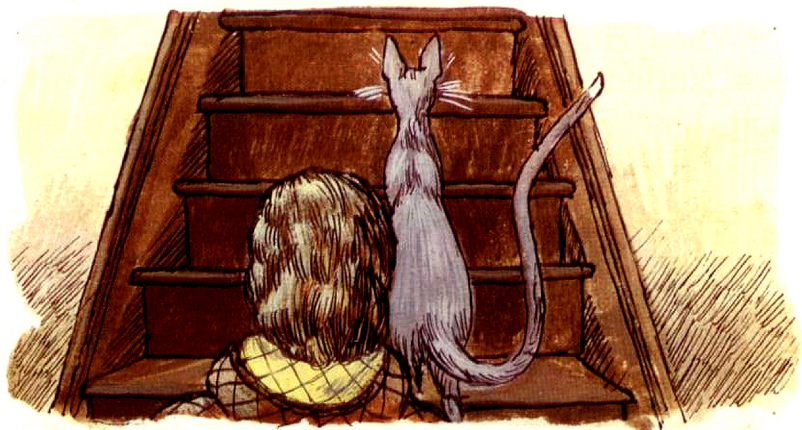
They flew very high and very fast, until they came to the town, and then they wobbled down over the roofs in such a jerky way that Tim wondered if Tobias was ill.



When they slipped over the last roofs into The Yard, Tim expected Tobias to take the broomstick over to his window. But Tobias didn't. He dropped the broomstick down to the ground so quickly, that Tim fell off as they landed under the lamp.

It was only when he got to his feet that he saw that it was not Tobias at all: it was Sebastian.





Tim had been friends with Sebastian ever since he had saved the little cat from Miss Miff.

Sebastian ran over to him, and rubbed himself against Tim's legs.

"Sebastian!" said Tim. "Sebastian! I didn't know you could fly a broomstick."

But Sebastian didn't want to stay in The Yard. He ran across to Tim's house. Tim followed. He found the key under the stone, so he knew that Aunt May must still be out. He went in, and down to the kitchen, with Sebastian at his heels.

He gave Sebastian a saucer of milk and picked up his supper, which was on the table. Sebastian ran up the stairs ahead of him, as he went up to bed.

When Tim went to sleep that night, Sebastian was curled up at the bottom of the bed, and somehow Tim felt much safer with Sebastian there.





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